

## **Providing tools to counter the far-right; Activist alliance aims to teach how to fight racism in election run-up**

The Toronto Star

August 31, 2019 Saturday

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**Section:** NEWS; Pg. A7

**Length:** 864 words

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### **Body**

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It worries Janice Folk-Dawson when the veteran union leader sees hate posters popping up on university campuses and far-right supremacist groups showing up in her community.

"It's frightening to see small towns becoming the targets of hate groups," said the president of the Guelph and District Labour Council. "Fascism started in small towns and the education system. We need to address the rise of the right and bust the myths they spread."

Earlier this year, the 62-year-old, who is of Russian and Irish descent, enrolled in a workshop held by the Migrant Rights Network, a national anti-racism alliance that aims to help communities stand up against racism and the far right in the run-up to the federal election, when immigration and refugees are expected to be a wedge issue.

Formed last December to put migrant issues on the agenda for the Oct. 21 election, the alliance began canvassing migrant groups about the issues they were most concerned about.

Almost everyone cited their fear of rising racism and xenophobia in Canada and asked for assistance in pushing back against the spread of far-right ideologies. The alliance spent months developing training materials including a video and a tool kit, and since April has delivered more than 50 workshops training hundreds of volunteers - affiliated with unions, charities and community groups - from Squamish, B.C., to St. John's, N.L.

The aim is to have them reach out to their local communities and have conversations with family, friends and colleagues about immigration and refugee issues, armed with the facts on policies to counter myths fuelled by propaganda.

The network has organized rallies across the country, including a number on Labour Day, and begun monitoring candidates' campaign rhetoric and calling out those they feel are misinforming the public with racist and anti-immigrant comments. A newsletter will be distributed to people who sign up to support the alliance's work to keep them informed on issues and concerns raised during the campaign.

Karen Cocq, the alliance's education co-ordinator, said political parties and politicians, to consolidate their support base, often draw attention away from their own policy failures and point fingers at "the others," such as migrants.

Instead of blaming migrants for straining government services and pushing down wages, said Cocq, people should be asking politicians why they cut budgets and fail to properly protect workers with decent wages.

"We understand people are anxious about their future, about the economy and try to make sense of the problems they face. We want to focus on this climate of anxiety that allows scapegoating in our society," Cocq said.

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"We try to provide everyday folks the tools they need to understand what's going on and not get fooled by those who use racism to divide us."

Ottawa climate activist Katie Rae Perfitt of Our Time, a campaign that engages young people to push for a New Green Deal in the upcoming election, said her volunteers often hear Canadians raising issues about migration when they are canvassing about climate change.

Born and raised in a farming community in the Ottawa Valley, Perfitt said far-right groups exploit the fears of people who worry for the future of their children, about jobs being taken away and migrants being a drain on existing government services and the health-care system.

Recently, she was canvassing on Sparks St., a pedestrian mall in downtown Ottawa, when she struck up a conversation with an older man about climate change and the chat quickly turned to the influx of asylum seekers in Canada via the United States land border over the past two years.

"We really clicked talking about climate change and the political action needed. It caught me off guard when he started talking about what he thought of the people who crossed the border," the 32-year-old recalled. "I realized I had to pull out my migrant tool box."

Perfitt started asking the man about his source of information and presenting him with the facts that refugees have the legal right to seek asylum here, and trying to calm his fear that Canada has lost control of its border. "We did not agree 100 per cent, but we were able to centre our values, have a conversation and push back some of that fear," she said.

Folk-Dawson said these conversations can be hard because it's much easier for people to point at someone else for causing their miseries. "A debate of facts is not a debate of opinions. We try to help people work through their feelings and experience to alleviate their fear.

"It can be uncomfortable and confrontational," said Folk-Dawson, adding that even union supporters are susceptible to the myths that migrants are stealing jobs and pushing down wages.

In June, she was handing out flyers at the University of Guelph when a businessman in his 60s started complaining to her that border-crossing asylum seekers were queue-jumpers and immigrants were straining the health-care system.

She explained to him that those refugees really have no queue to jump because they are ineligible for any immigration program and that migrants do contribute to Canada's tax base, but often have limited access to government services.

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Document-Type:** COLUMN

**Publication-Type:** NEWSPAPER

**Subject:** RACISM & XENOPHOBIA (93%); FAR RIGHT POLITICS (90%); LABOR UNIONS (90%); NEGATIVE NEWS (90%); NEGATIVE SOCIETAL NEWS (90%); POLITICAL & SOCIAL IDEOLOGIES (90%); ELECTIONS & POLITICS (89%); GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION (89%); IMMIGRATION (89%); MIGRATION ISSUES (89%); POLITICS (89%); RACE & ETHNICITY (89%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (78%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (78%); EDUCATION & TRAINING (78%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS

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(78%); FASCISM (78%); POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS (78%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (78%); CLIMATE ACTION (77%); COMMUNITY ACTIVISM (77%); ELECTIONS (77%); SOCIETAL ISSUES (77%); DISINFORMATION & MISINFORMATION (76%); MIGRANT WORKERS (76%); PLATFORMS & ISSUES (76%); POLITICAL PARTIES (76%); REFUGEES (75%); VOLUNTEERS (66%); COMPENSATION & BENEFITS (60%)

**Industry:** EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (78%); BUDGETS (71%); BUDGET CUTS (50%)

**Geographic:** OTTAWA, ON, CANADA (79%); SAINT JOHN'S, NL, CANADA (79%); CANADA (79%)

**Load-Date:** August 31, 2019

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